

We are so lucky to live near the coast and to be able to get fresh NC seafood! I do love it and it is good for you. In these recipes we tried to use wild caught as well as farm raised to give you a sampling of what is coming into season for March, April and May. Check out the link to the NC Seafood Availability Chart and Sea Grant NC to find out what's fresh all year long. Remember, seafood isn't just for restaurants or when you are down at the coast. You can enjoy cooking it yourself and it is quick and easy. Fresh is always better so go to your local seafood market or ask the seafood manager at your local grocery store what has just come in and is fresh from North Carolina. Enjoy!

Clam Chowder

1 can (6.5 oz.) chopped clams
2 cans (6.5 oz.) minced clams
-Drain and reserve juice
2 stalks celery thinly sliced
1 med. Onion diced
4 large baking potatoes cut into bite size pieces
1-pound center cut bacon – reserve grease
1/2 tsp. dried thyme
6 stems fresh thyme with thyme pulled off
1-cup heavy cream
2 cups half & half
4 cups milk

Cook onions and celery in reserved bacon grease until soft and tender approximately 5 minutes. Season them with salt and pepper. Add reserved clam juice and potatoes along with enough water to just cover the potatoes. Bring them to a boil and cook until the potatoes are fork tender approximately 15 minutes. Add 1/4 tsp. of the dried thyme while cooking the potatoes and season with salt and pepper.

Take out 1 ladle full (3/4 cup) of potato, celery mixture and put into a mixing bowl. Cover with a ladle full (3/4 cup) of the broth. Puree with a hand blender or you can puree this mixture in a blender. Return mixture to the pot and add the clams. Then add heavy cream, half & half and milk. Put on med.- high heat to heat through approximately 10 minutes. Add the remaining dried thyme and the fresh thyme along with salt and pepper. Serve with crumbled bacon and/or oyster crackers.

PERSONAL Note: This is a family favorite year round and we never really make it the same way twice. Sometimes we want it thicker so we don't put in as much of the milk. Sometime we want it a little healthier so we use 1% milk and less cream. Then sometimes we even throw in a little fat back with the bacon. Enjoy this recipe and make it your own.

*The following recipes are courtesy of the Mariner's Menu cookbook, published by NC Sea Grant in conjunction with Freshness From NC waters.

Baked Oysters with Bacon

2 dozen large unshucked oysters
6 slices bacon
1-cup fresh cracker crumbs
½ cup mayonnaise
2 tablespoons thinly sliced green onion, including tops
1-teaspoon fresh lemon juice
1-teaspoon hot sauce (I prefer Texas Pete which is made in NC)
½ teaspoon Dijon mustard
½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
Rock salt

Scrub oysters with stiff brush under cold, running water. Shuck, reserving deep half of shells. Drain oysters.

Cut bacon slices into quarters. Cook until limp, but not brown.
In small bowl, combine crumbs, mayonnaise, onion, lemon juice, hot sauce and mustard.

Place a deep layer of rock salt in the bottom of a large pan or baking dish. Arrange reserved shells in rock salt, being sure that they are level. Place one oyster in each shell. Spread crumb mixture over each. Top with a piece of bacon, then sprinkle with cheese. Bake at 450 degrees until bacon is crisp and oysters are done, about 8 to 10 minutes. Serves 4 to 6.

PERSONAL Note: These would be great for a party! If you can get fresh oysters already shucked that's fine too. You can put the oysters in any shell you may have around. We used a cockle shell because it is larger and easy to hold. It would hold 2-3 oysters so that is a perfect single appetizer for a guest to pick up and enjoy.

Flaked Fish Casserole

4 cups cooked flaked fish (recipe to follow)
¼ cup margarine or butter
¼ cup flour
½ teaspoon dry mustard
1-teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 cups milk
1 cup grated medium cheddar cheese
½ cup fresh cracker crumbs
2 tablespoons margarine or butter, melted

In medium saucepan, melt ¼ cup margarine. Add flour, mustard, salt and pepper. Stir in milk gradually and cook until thick. Add cheese and stir until melted.

In greased 1 ½ quart casserole, place a layer of flaked fish, then a layer of sauce.

Continue alternating layers, ending with sauce. Combine crumbs with melted margarine and sprinkle over top. Bake at 350 degrees for 40 minutes or until golden brown and bubble. Serves 8 to 10.

Flaked Fish: For flaking, fish is usually poached or steamed. Then the meat is flaked away for the bone with a fork. You can do this by making a nice court bouillon or simply use lightly seasoned water. I like the following method: melt ¼ cup of margarine or butter in a pan. Lightly sauté a bed of cut onions, celery and carrots, adding garlic powder, freshly ground black pepper and a bay leaf. Place fish on vegetable bed. Add water to half submerge the fish. Cover and bring to a simmer. Cook with just enough heat to produce steam, on simmer or lower. Do not boil. Cook until fish flakes easily with a fork. Cooking time will be determined by the size of the fish. Remove fish and let cool enough to handle. Remove and discard skin, dark meat and rib portion. Gently flake meat for the backbone with a fork.

PERSONAL Note: The great thing about this casserole is you can use a variety of fish. Whatever is in season or if you have a type of fish you prefer. Children also enjoy this recipe because of the cheese sauce.

Broiled Catfish

6 medium catfish fillets

1/3-cup soy sauce

¼ teaspoon hot sauce

3 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 teaspoon pressed garlic

½ teaspoon ground ginger

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Lemon wedges

Combine soy sauce, hot sauce, oil, garlic, ginger, salt and pepper. Place fish in sauce and marinate in refrigerator for 30 minutes. Place fish on oiled broiler pan. Broil and 4 inches from heat, basting occasionally, for 8 to 10 minutes, or until fish flakes easily when tested with a fork. Serve with lemon wedges. Serves 6.

PERSONAL Note: This recipe is quick and easy. While your fish is marinating, cook some saffron rice and steamed asparagus. It cooks up so quickly; you will be eating a delicious and nutritious meal in no time. Try it with flounder or striped bass. I like to have fish or seafood on the day I do my grocery shopping.

Crab-Stuffed Cherry Tomatoes

1-cup backfin crabmeat
1-pound cherry tomatoes
¼ cup mayonnaise
2 tablespoons finely chopped green onion, including tops
1-teaspoon fresh lemon juice
¼ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
½ teaspoon hot sauce
Fresh parsley sprigs

Remove any shell or cartilage from crabmeat.

Wash, dry and hollow tomatoes. Invert and drain on paper towels. In medium bowl, mix mayonnaise, onion and lemon juice. Add salt, pepper and hot sauce and stir. Gently fold in crabmeat. Stuff tomatoes. Chill thoroughly. Garnish serving dish with parsley sprigs. Makes 25 to 30 appetizers. Note: You can substitute chopped cooked shrimp for the crabmeat.

PERSONAL Note: This crab dip was delicious not only in the tomatoes but on crackers. I know crabmeat can be a little pricey but with the amount of appetizers it makes, it is well worth it. Not to mention, guests always eat this one up!

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NC Sea Grant

<http://www.ncseagrant.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page&filename=localcatch.html>